FIVE REMARKABLE WOMEN,
THE BABY WHO SURVIVED,
AND THE WILL OF GOD
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Psalm 121
Matthew 16:13–20
Exodus 1:8–2:10

"When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket; . . . she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river."
Exodus 2:3 (NRSV)

That God is all-powerful does not mean that everything that happens is the will of God.
It means that God's loving and just will *will* be done. Many things happen that God does not will and cause. I believe, for instance, that God does not will
or "send" floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, cancer or birth defects.
And I am *sure* that God does not will any form of sin, evil, and injustice, or any of the personal or collective suffering that result from them.
Sickness, sin, suffering, injustice and death are by definition what God does not *will*, and what God is *against* and is at work to *overcome* and *destroy*.

Shirley C. Guthrie Jr.
Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World

Draw near, O God, in the silence of this hour. Settle us down; silence in us any voice but your own; speak the word you have for us; and give us courage to hear, believe, trust, and follow Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If Stephen Prothero is right, most people don't know the story of Moses in the bulrushes. Prothero is professor of religion at Boston University, and his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* documents the fact that simple familiarity with the content of the Bible is at an all-time low. Prothero begins each semester with a "Bible Content" quiz and learns that 75 percent of his students think the statement "God helps

those who help themselves" is in the Bible (it was Benjamin Franklin), that most don't know that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, and many can't name one of the Gospels and think that Noah's wife was Joan of Arc.

While including amusing anecdotes about biblical ignorance, Prothero's book is serious about this relatively new phenomenon. Prothero thinks that it's not just biblical ignorance but ignorance about religion in general. And he worries about that a lot. He points out that a lot of domestic controversies—issues that play a critical role in elections, for instance, are bound up in religion: intelligent design, gay marriage, abortion, stem-cell research. Prothero, and others suggest that if the FBI had better understood the Branch Davidians and David Koresh's apocalyptic theology, the 1993 tragic conflagration might have been avoided. Prothero says that it is a rare world crisis—Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine—that is not rooted in religion and proposes that "you need religious literacy in order to be an effective citizen."

A few years ago, I launched a sermon series on "Bible Stories Everyone Should Know." And because Prothero is onto something in *Religious Literacy*, it is a series that has a potentially very long life ahead of it, indeed.

This morning, the story of the birth of Moses: "Five Remarkable Women, the Baby Who Survived, and the Will of God."

It's a gem of a story. Moses will emerge as the leader and liberator of the Hebrew people, the father and founder of Israel, and one of the most important people in history.

The children of Israel, the Hebrews, are in Egypt because generations before, during a famine, they migrated south looking for food, and the Egyptians welcomed them. They settled in and thrived, generation after generation of Hebrews, guests of the Egyptians. They thrived so much that a new king looks at them suspiciously, worries about a potential fifth column. Their size and strength constitute a security threat to the state, and so the new king turns them into forced laborers, slaves. They do the Egyptians' building projects—houses, palaces, pyramids, entire cities—and still they continue to thrive.

The king summons the Hebrew midwives, in charge of birthing the Hebrew babies. (They obviously are very busy.) Their names are Shiprah and Puah. The king orders them to stop the Hebrew population explosion at the source: kill all the boy babies. That should resolve the security threat in one generation. The first two of the five remarkable women in this story are the first feminists in history. They ignore what the men tell them to do; they disobey orders. The babies keep coming. When the king summons and

questions them, they lie and get away with it. “These Hebrew mothers are strong,” they say. “They have their babies before we can get there. Sorry about that.”

Two strong, brave, faithful, remarkable women back on the edge of history listen to the voice of God, their conscience, engage in civil disobedience, disobey orders, and allow the story of God and God’s people to continue.

Now it’s time for Moses. The king, angry that Plan A didn’t work, launches Plan B, a blunt cruel order: drown the baby boys. Once again women throw a wrench into the gears of the king’s plans. The story has always been a favorite with children. Back in the days of flannelgraph teaching, before audiovisuals, the Sunday school teacher employed a large piece of black flannel tacked to a piece of plywood. Flannel characters were then placed on the board to create a colorful tableau of whatever story was being taught. Over on the left is a woman carrying an infant in her arms. With her is a young girl, her daughter. They weave a basket of grass, place the baby in it, and carefully hide it, floating in the river in the bulrushes. The boys in the class start to laugh. One of them has observed that if that baby makes a move, he’s going to fall out of that basket and drown. Now a procession of young women approach from the right: Pharaoh’s daughter and her entourage, the attendants fanning the princess with those huge Egyptian palm leaves. The princess tests the river water with her foot. Here comes the basket. “Look,” the princess says, “it’s a baby, a Hebrew baby. Let’s take him home.” One of her attendants picks up Moses from the basket. Now Moses’ sister Miriam moves across the flannelgraph. “I know a Hebrew woman who would be happy to help you take care of that baby.” Off she goes across the flannelgraph to her mother, waiting in the corner. Back the two of them come. It’s the baby’s mother. She takes the baby in her arms, and they all walk back to the royal palace. The baby is safe—in his mother’s arms. The story of the people of God, after a very close call, can continue because of five remarkable women: Shiprah and Puah, who disobeyed orders; Moses’ mother, who refuses to comply with royal policy; Moses’ sister, Miriam, so innovative that she surreptitiously arranges for her mother to become the royal nursemaid and care for her own child; and Pharaoh’s daughter, who knows the law but has mercy in her heart and engages, herself, in civil disobedience by adopting and raising this Hebrew baby as if he were her own.

What a gem of a story: five remarkable women, each of whom breaks the law, breaks with custom and convention, to do what is right and just and good and merciful and whose behavior God blesses. Their refusal to comply, obey civil authorities, is the reason Moses lives and the story can continue.

I read Joseph Ellis’s *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic* and was reminded again that the issue of

disobeying the law in the name of justice and goodness and truth is at the heart of the founding of our nation. The founders were British citizens. They struggled with the moral quandary of listening to conscience, to justice—some of them understood it to be the voice of God—and then intentionally disobeying, engaging in civil disobedience, then revolution.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, son of upper-middle-class German professional people, had to struggle mightily with his natural and culturally conditioned propensity to obey the rules over against his aversion to Nazi ideology. He went with his conscience, broke the law, joined the resistance, and paid with his life.

Not so very long ago, in the civil rights movement of the ’60s, American men and women, normally conventional, law-abiding citizens, deliberately broke laws their conscience—many of them called it the voice of God—told them were unfair, unjust, and wrong. They sat at segregated lunch counters, deliberately disobeyed racist laws, picketed, protested, marched. Some ended up in jail. Others were tear-gassed, beaten, blasted with water and canons; a few were killed.

If the Bible is to be trusted, people will do that—people like Shiprah and Puah, people like Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, people like Rosa Parks, a remarkably brave woman who subverted the law, refused to move to the back of the bus, and ended up changing history.

The story of Moses and the five remarkable women is the story of God working to bring in the kingdom through the events of history, the small and seemingly inconsequential lives and decisions of individual people.

God is the major player here. But there is a big issue lurking that must be acknowledged. There is a dark side to this. Baby Moses survived, but one has to assume a lot of babies didn’t. Centuries later another king, Herod, King of the Jews, will order all the babies of Bethlehem killed. The infant Jesus survives because his parents took him away, to Egypt, interestingly. But one has to assume a lot of babies did not.

If God is acting, is God choosing some babies to save and others to discard or to punish? Sometimes it sounds like that is what we believe: that God intercedes, rescues some and visits suffering and death on others as an expression of God’s will. In a major article on Christian faith and suffering in a recent *New Yorker*, James Wood remembers that Pat Robertson suggested that former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s stroke was God’s response to him turning Gaza over to the Palestinians; a prominent televangelist said that God sent Hurricane Katrina to New Orleans as punishment for a gay pride parade; and televangelist John Hagee announced, appallingly, that the Holocaust was God’s way of achieving the

greater good of allowing the Jews to reclaim Israel—a comment for which he has apologized.

We need to approach carefully and humbly. To the question of why, if God is good and actively involved in the world, there is suffering, there is no simple answer. It is appropriate to say we don't know the answer. What we can say with confidence is that a good and gracious God does not will or cause leaders to die and planes to crash and tyrants to oppress. What we know from our own experience is that when something good happens, when surgery is successful, when the baby is born healthy, we cannot not say thank you, cannot not be grateful to God. And what we can know with confidence is that God does become part of this life with us: that God does keep watch over us all, that God does surround us with gracious, healing, resurrecting love: Moses, floating down the river in his little basket, right into the waiting arms of a princess. But the other babies, too. You and me when we are healthy and alive, and when we are not.

What these old stories teach us, and what we can know with confidence, is that God is on the side of justice and freedom and peace in history and that the opponents of justice and freedom and peace are fighting a losing battle. Tyranny will fail. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, al Qaeda—the good and gracious God of history is alive and working to bring in the kingdom. The slaves will be free. The exiles will come home. The lame will walk and the blind will see. Truth and goodness and justice and peace will win.

We know it because God has come into history, come into our life in Jesus Christ and nothing, not even death, could undo him.

"Who do you say that I am?" he asked his friends one time. "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," they confessed, but almost immediately, when he started to talk about how he would suffer and die, they backed away. "God forbid, Lord, that you should suffer."

It is our central, most precious, most Christian belief that God would suffer, that God knows what it is to watch a beloved son die.

Distinguished Presbyterian theologian, the late Shirley Guthrie, not long before he died after a long and heroic struggle with cancer, wrote,

> To live by faith in a God of sovereign and suffering love who cares enough to suffer with and for suffering humanity . . . means to expect and experience the presence and work of God in our own lives and in the world around us—where there is pain, suffering, and dying and where there is health, happiness. and success. . . . Not because God wills and sends the bad as well as the good but because God is so powerful that

> nothing can happen to us so painful that God cannot be with and for us in the midst of it. (*Always Being Reformed*, p. 52)

What God did in and through the drama of an endangered people and an endangered child in Egypt thousands of years ago enabled God's people to survive and live into the future.

God's will was done through the courage and faithfulness of five women who refused to obey orders, who listened instead to their conscience, the voice of God in their hearts.

In this old, old story, God came to be with people in the common events of daily life: birth of the babies, caring for the children, protecting and nurturing the most vulnerable.

What God did in that drama thousands of years ago, God did ultimately in Bethlehem of Judea and in Jerusalem, on a cross and in an empty tomb: showed that we, even you and I, can be instruments of God's will, God's justice and truth, when we listen to our conscience, God's voice in our hearts.

Showed that we are not alone, none of us, ever alone, but loved, protected from ultimate harm, held in the embrace of the one who created us, who wants to live through us, and who will love us forever.

Amen.